
Presentation Sisters, 2005
anamorphic film, optical sound
duration: 60 min
loan, Crawford Art Gallery, Cork
courtesy Crawford Art Gallery and Tacita Dean

Tacita Dean Presentation Sisters



Tacita Dean
b. 1965, Canterbury, England. Lives
and works in Berlin

Tacita Dean studied art at the Falmouth School of Art in England, the Supreme School of Fine Art in Athens, and the Slade School of Fine Art in London. In 1998, she was nominated for a Turner Prize and was awarded a DAAD scholarship for Berlin, Germany, in 2000. She has received the following prizes: Aachen Art Prize (2002); the Primo Regione Piemonte Art Prize from the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy (2004); the Sixth Biennale Prize at the 51st Venice Biennale (2005); the Hugo Boss Prize Nomination at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (2006); and the Kurt Schwitters Preis Award, Germany (2009). Dean also participated in the Venice Biennale in 2003 and 2005. She had a solo exhibition at the Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane in 2007 and forthcoming solo exhibitions include *Five Americans* at New Museum, New York (2012) and *Tacita Dean* at Norton Museum of Art, Florida (2012).

In 2005, Tacita Dean was invited to Cork (the European City of Culture) to make a work in response to the city of Cork¹. Initially she was interested in the Titanic Centre because of her interest in sinking ships.² During her time in Cork, she wandered around the city and came across a graveyard, which was of interest because the plots were small and some of the head stones were missing. In response to the site, and before she had even thought about the content of her film, Dean came up with a provisional working title of *The Last Plot*. These details of a specific place intrigued Dean and she decided to further explore this site and the convent on which the remains of this small graveyard stood. On closer inspection, Dean discovered five nuns living in the convent – known as the order of the Presentation Sisters. This resulted in the original work retitled as the *Presentation Sisters*.

The project was curated by Sarah Glennie and over a period of time, Dean came to know and spend time with the nuns in the South Presentation Convent. Using film, she documented their daily rituals of prayer, making tea and scones, cleaning, chatting and watching television. These everyday routines became the main subject of Dean's hour-long film, which explored the life of the nuns and their close quarters at the convent, alongside the broader issue of female domestic labour. Dean decided that the film had to be an hour long because the nuns read hourly and daily from *The Book of Hours* (in the Christian Church this is a book containing the prayers or offices to be said at the canonical hours of the day, particularly popular in the Middle Ages). Dean was especially drawn to the continued presence of these five women in the original building built by the order's founder, Nano Nagle, a local to Cork. The film, made in full collaboration with the sisters, captures the daily life of these sisters and their convent in an evocative series of moving images. The mundane acts of washing, ironing, folding and cooking are recognised by Dean as unique and far from the everyday.

Background to Tacita Dean's process

Originally trained as a painter, Tacita Dean works primarily in 16-millimetre film, but also uses other media such as drawing, sound and photography. Many of her projects are located in and respond to a particular place, story, object or event both from the past and in the present. In art practice we use the term *site-specific*, to denote this way of working. What this means is that an artist will investigate/respond to their immediate surroundings or to new and strange places. They may have either researched before they get there or decided to lose themselves in a place in order to discover/uncover something new or different. Framed within this context, Dean will often combine historical narrative in a contemporary and/or new context. This is a process of re-telling forgotten stories or indeed stories left out of the canon of history. What informs Dean's work is her interest in people. This has resulted in a series of films described as relational portraits of a person and/or community. Dean is interested in older people as subjects for her films 'because they carry so much information in their bodies and have an incredible grace about them at that point in their lives'.³

Dean's principle medium is film, in particular 16mm film which is considered by some to be an out-dated medium because of the proliferation of, and easy access to, digital technologies. For Dean there are qualities to film making that cannot be expressed in digital form. These qualities include rough edges and flickering light, lush colours, the use of shadow and space, silence and filmic time which, in film terms, is known as a 'roll of time'. This process reveals slow panoramic views of a landscape that often capture changes in natural light or subtle shifts in movement, taken from all angles to build up a sense of time passing. The manipulation of film as a physical material revealed in the editing process is essential to the making of her works. Here she cuts and pastes sections of the actual film by hand restructuring the film sequence after it has been shot. She records sound separately from film work and, through an intense editing process, sounds are overlaid onto the final cut of the film. Dean's films are presented using a film projector, which maintains a prominent position in the gallery space. This is a noisy contraption that projects films onto a surface – be it a wall, floor, and/or specific material or built environment designed for each film. The use of the projector is intentional in Dean's work because it creates an atmospheric dimension to the film as it unfolds in real time.

This is due, in part, to the sound the actual projector makes as it reels through the film systematically as a looped installation.

Some questions to consider

What are your immediate reactions to the film?

Is it shot in colour or black and white?

Is there a soundtrack? If so, how does it relate to the visual imagery?

What sorts of film techniques does the artist use (e.g. close up views, awkward angles, slowing down the frames, dramatic lighting)?

How long is the film?

What do you think the film is about?

What particular issues is the artist concerned with?

How does the work make you think about time?

Do you feel part of the film or simply an observer?

How does this particular film and gallery space make you feel?

For discussion

What does this film tell you about Cork?

Why do you think Dean chose the Convent?

What role do the nuns play in this film?

What role does sound play in this film?

Why do you think there is no dramatic action or dialogue?

Is there a story within this film?

In what ways is Dean's film different from a documentary film?

Dean is described as being 'obsessed with time' in her films. How does she convey a sense of time here?

Why do you think Dean slows time down – is Dean making a comment on our overworked and busy lifestyles or is she commenting on how important our daily activities are?

Can you identify with the daily activities of the nuns?

Why do you think she rejects new technologies in favour of analogue filmmaking, which is a much slower and time-considered activity?

Key words

ANALOGUE

Something which bears a resemblance to something else. In digital technology an analogue device transmits and encodes sound and imagery as a continuous flow of signals.

CONCEPTUAL

A mode of arts practice which emphasises the idea or concept over the production of a tangible art object. Conceptual art emerged in the 1960s and has continued to influence contemporary art.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Electronic data storage and transmission technology that enables immense amounts of information to be compressed on small storage devices, such as computers and telephones, that can easily be preserved, retrieved and transported.

THE EVERYDAY

Referring to commonplace, ordinary or routine events and activities.

INSTALLATION

The configuration of objects in a space where the totality of the objects and the space comprise the object.

RITUAL

Activities or tasks which involve repetition, habit and monotony.

SITE-SPECIFIC

Artwork that is created in response to a specific site with the intention of being located in the site, and where removal from the site would change the meaning of the artwork. Often associated with Installation Art, Land Art and Public Art.

16-MILLIMETRE FILM

Film stock developed in the 1920s for amateur and industrial use. Since the 1960s, when it became more affordable, it has been used widely by artists in experimental filmmaking.

Activities

Making films

This exhibition could be the starting point for a range of film-making activities.

Experiment with some of Dean's techniques such as slow fixed shots, wide horizontal views, collaged sounds and fading light.

Think about your daily activities at home or school by yourself, with family or friends, both visually and in terms of sound. How might you record these events?

Stories about places

Seen together Dean's films create an unfolding story about the nuns in the convent. Develop your own work about a place you know well. Create a story about this place, using film or photography, text and sound.

Filming light

Everyone has tried to capture that special sunset or full moon but how do you really capture changing light, weather and the passing of time? Develop work that contrasts painted and drawn records with film and photography.

Symbolic buildings

What do buildings tell us about past and present times? How does architecture speak to us about social, political and economic history? Develop project work based on the theme of symbolic buildings – churches, town halls, courthouses, convents, etc. – apply a range of techniques such as collage, photography and other mixed media.

Further Explorations

This exhibition focuses on Dean's response to Cork through her film *Presentation Sisters*. Look also at other works by the artist, such as *Fernsehturm* (2001), which records the nightly and daily activities of diners in the revolving restaurant of a television tower in Berlin. This was Dean's first film shot in Berlin where she has lived since 2001. Also consider *Pie* (2003), based on the view from her studio as well as the sound piece *Berlin Project* (2002), where Dean uses recorded sounds interlaced with radio and other commentaries. See also Dean's Berlin work *Die Regimentstochter* (2005), based on opera and theatre programmes of the 1930s and 1940s. Dean's earlier work was preoccupied with land and sea such as *Disappearance at Sea I* (1996), which focused on the tragic story of the amateur yachtsman Donald Crowhurst who attempted (and failed) to win a round-the-world race without ever leaving the Atlantic. This film features a lighthouse off the coast of Britain. Like *Fernsehturm*, the film records the fading evening light and the gradual shift from inside (the lighthouse) to outside (the vast expanse of sea). See also her film portraits of artist Mario Merz (2003), which she recorded in San Gimignano in Tuscany, motivated by his resemblance to her father. Also consider her collaboration with the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham (2007), who choreographed and performed a tribute to the artist John Cage.

¹ www.cork2005.ie/programme/strands/architecture/tacitadean.shtml

² See *Disappearance at Sea I & II* (1996/1997).

³ Tacita Dean in conversation with Robert Ayers, 2008, www.artinfo.com/news/story/27914/tacita-dean

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Further reading

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